

Dealing with Aggressive Employees

Workplace aggression can be subtle or overt, but it is always problematic. Employees who behave aggressively cause those around them discomfort, decrease morale, and can even cause loss of employees or customers, damage the organization's reputation and negatively impact the bottom line. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to address and eliminate aggressive behavior.

Identify the aggressive behavior

We are all familiar with the most overt forms of aggression: physical outbursts (such as hitting or throwing), "raging" (uncontrolled anger), yelling, and other forms of highly visible and disruptive behavior. These forms are not only identifiable but short-lived: they most often result in termination or enrollment into anger-management programs. It is the more subtle, nuanced forms of aggression that hurt the workplace the most. This can include behaviors such as challenging others to prove themselves; intimidation tactics like staring intensely or standing too close; verbal abuse; bullying (in person or online); lying or deceitfully causing others to fail; subtle insults or backhanded compliments. Even subtler is passive-aggressive behavior, taking the form of friendly and proactive personal interactions followed by evasion, thwarting another's success, cynicism, hostility, sarcasm, or online aggression. Some forms of aggression are so subtle that the person doesn't realize they're behaving aggressively, so it's important to identify it promptly.

Document observable examples

Aggressive behavior is self-focused, demanding and angry. The aggressor wants control over a situation or person, or to show they are "right." Aggression is often a reflection of insecurity. A firm, but supportive, intervention is usually the most successful.

A critical step in addressing aggression with an employee is to be able to offer observable examples, identifying the behavior in terms they cannot easily dismiss. Those prone to aggression are often also prone to defensiveness. It's important for you to have sound, documented

examples to counter this defensiveness. Vague statements of unwanted behavior leave room for misinterpretation or confusion. For example, "sometimes you're intimidating," or "some of your coworkers find you condescending," is vague. It is more impactful to say, "Last Tuesday you sent an email to the team that said they 'ruined everything and it would've been better if you had just done the project yourself.' That was hurtful and interpreted as condescending because they felt they worked hard on that project."

State the impact

As succinctly as possible, state both the current and potential impact of their behavior. How has their behavior affected morale or productivity? How do others feel about working with this person? More importantly, state what is possible if they fix the behavior. How might productivity increase if they were perceived as a trusted member of the team? Identifying ways they may be more successful if they alter their behavior will help motivate them to make necessary changes.

Be calm and consistent

Because aggression usually surfaces when an employee feels a lack of control, embarrassment or shame, your consistent and controlled behavior will help diffuse the situation. The adage "fight fire with fire" doesn't work with aggression – it only causes more aggression! Take an alternative stance of calm, decisive and assertive language. Being consistent in addressing the behavior is also key.



Each time there is an observable example, let the employee know. Indicate you are doing so to help them identify (1) what the specific behavior is and (2) what circumstances or stressors may be bringing it on. It's important they know they have an ally in addressing this behavior. These conversations should be held privately and at times when the employee can focus on your message.

Involve HR

When the problem behavior is not changing, make sure you involve HR in your attempts to address the behavior. Be sure you follow your organization's policies for performance documentation and employee discipline. A team approach will strengthen your efforts to resolve the problem behavior, provide guidance on company policy, and protect you from missteps that could further damage the cohesiveness of the work group.

Refer to the EAP

PAS is an excellent resource for supporting employees with problem behavior and helping them address the factors – personal or professional – that are contributing to their behavior. Call PAS at (800) 356-0845 to consult with a Performance Management Specialist and make a performance referral. Notify the employee that you are making a formal referral to the EAP and that you are expecting the employee to call PAS to work with an EAP counselor to improve performance and change the behavior.

If the employee's aggressive behavior violates employment policy and is egregious, HR may determine that a

Last Chance Agreement is in order and may mandate that the employee contact the EAP and participate in counseling as a term of continued employment. Leave these decisions to HR.

Know when it's time to go

Occasionally, despite your best efforts, aggressive behavior does not stop. It is critical to notice the ongoing impact the aggressive behavior has on your workforce: if employees believe this behavior is acceptable, or that you aren't willing to deal with it, they may become less productive, behave aggressively themselves, or leave the company. You must weigh the opportunity for change against the impact it has on your work culture.



Aggressive behavior is never easy, but it is manageable. Employees thrive when they feel they are in a safe and supportive workplace. Show your commitment to their success by dealing promptly and effectively with aggressive behavior.

Get Guidance

PAS offers performance management consultation to address the needs of managers and supervisors in managing their workforce. Just a few areas that PAS offers expertise:

- Unsatisfactory performance
- Anger management
- Drug-free workplace
- Policy violations
- Absenteeism and tardiness
- Workgroup conflict and co-worker relationships
- Erratic, bizarre or threatening behavior
- Threats of violence
- Mistakes, missed deadlines, re-work
- Harassment, intimidation and aggression



Contact PAS

To discuss concerns about an employee's workplace performance or behavior, obtain more information on the performance referral process, or to make a referral to the EAP, contact PAS at:

(800) 356-0845

<https://www.paseap.com>

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